

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

JOHN FLOYD III,

Plaintiff,

-against-

ELIZA FILIPOWSKI, Assistant District
Attorney; CHRISTOPHER SEVIER, Criminal
Lawyer — the Legal Aid Society; VINCENT
GIOVANNIELLO, Police Officer, City of
Middletown, NY Police Department; ANDREW
CUOMO, Governor of the State of New York,

Defendants.

USDC SDNY
DOCUMENT
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21-CV-4096 (NSR)

ORDER OF SERVICE

NELSON S. ROMÁN, United States District Judge:

Plaintiff, currently incarcerated at the Lakeview Correctional Facility, brings this *pro se* action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, alleging that Defendants violated his constitutional rights. By order dated May 7, 2021, the Court granted Plaintiff's request to proceed without prepayment of fees, that is, *in forma pauperis* (IFP).¹

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Prison Litigation Reform Act requires that federal courts screen complaints brought by prisoners who seek relief against a governmental entity or an officer or employee of a governmental entity. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a). The Court must dismiss a prisoner's IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B), 1915A(b); *see Abbas v. Dixon*, 480 F.3d 636, 639

¹ Prisoners are not exempt from paying the full filing fee even when they have been granted permission to proceed IFP. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1).

(2d Cir. 2007). The Court must also dismiss a complaint if the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

DISCUSSION

A. Claims Against the Named Defendants

1. Assistant District Attorney Filipowski

Prosecutors are immune from civil suits for damages for acts committed within the scope of their official duties where the challenged activities are not investigative in nature but, rather, are “‘intimately associated with the judicial phase of the criminal process.’” *Giraldo v. Kessler*, 694 F.3d 161, 165 (2d Cir. 2012) (quoting *Imbler v. Pachtman*, 424 U.S. 409, 430 (1976)); *see also Buckley v. Fitzsimmons*, 509 U.S. 259, 269 (1993) (absolute immunity is analyzed under a “functional approach” that “looks to the nature of the function performed, not the identity of the actor who performed it” (internal quotation marks and citations omitted)). In addition, prosecutors are absolutely immune from suit for acts that may be administrative obligations but are “directly connected with the conduct of a trial.” *Van de Kamp v. Goldstein*, 555 U.S. 335, 344 (2009); *see also Ogunkoya v. Monaghan*, 913 F.3d 64, 70-72 (2d Cir. 2019) (holding that ADAs’ direction as to where criminal defendant would be arraigned was in preparation for a court proceeding in which the prosecutors were acting as advocates, and ADAs were therefore shielded by absolute immunity (citing, *inter alia*, *Van de Kamp*)).

Here, Plaintiff’s claims against Defendant Filipowski are based on actions within the scope of her official duties and associated with the conduct of a trial. Therefore, these claims are dismissed because they seek monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from suit and as frivolous. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(i), (iii); *see Collazo v. Pagano*, 656 F. 3d 131, 134 (2d Cir. 2011) (holding that claim against prosecutor is frivolous if it arises from conduct that is “intimately associated with the judicial phase of the criminal process”).

2. Attorney Sevier

A claim for relief under § 1983 must allege facts showing that each defendant acted under the color of a state “statute, ordinance, regulation, custom or usage.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Private parties are therefore not generally liable under the statute. *Sykes v. Bank of America*, 723 F.3d 399, 406 (2d Cir. 2013) (citing *Brentwood Acad. v. Tenn. Secondary Sch. Athletic Ass’n*, 531 U.S. 288, 295 (2001)); see also *Ciambriello v. Cnty. of Nassau*, 292 F.3d 307, 323 (2d Cir. 2002) (“[T]he United States Constitution regulates only the Government, not private parties.”). Absent special circumstances suggesting concerted action between an attorney and a state representative, see *Nicholas v. Goord*, 430 F.3d 652, 656 n.7 (2d Cir. 2005) (citing *Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 152 (1970)), the representation of a defendant by private counsel in state criminal proceedings does not constitute the degree of state involvement or interference necessary to establish a claim under § 1983, regardless of whether that attorney is privately retained, court-appointed, or employed as a public defender. See *Bourdon v. Loughren*, 386 F.3d 88, 90 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 324-25 (1981)); see also *Schnabel v. Abramson*, 232 F.3d 83, 87 (2d Cir. 2000) (holding that legal aid organization ordinarily is not a state actor for purposes of § 1983).

As Defendant Sevier is a private party who do not work for any state or other government body, Plaintiff has not stated a claim against him under § 1983.²

² Plaintiff asserts that Sevier conspired with Filipowski to violate his due process rights. A plaintiff asserting a conspiracy claim under § 1983 or § 1985 must show (1) an agreement between two or more state actors or between a state actor and a private entity; (2) to act in concert to inflict an unconstitutional injury; and (3) an overt act done in furtherance of that goal causing damages. *Pangburn v. Culbertson*, 200 F.3d 65, 72 (2d Cir. 1999). Vague assertions of a conspiracy will not suffice. See, e.g., *Wang v. Miller*, 356 F. App’x 516, 517 (2d Cir. 2009) (summary order); *Webb v. Goord*, 340 F.3d 105, 110-11 (2d Cir. 2003); *Boddie v. Schnieder*, 105 F.3d 857, 862 (2d Cir. 1997). Plaintiff’s conspiracy claim fails because the emails attached to the complaint do not show that Sevier and Filipowski conspired to violate his constitutional rights.

3. Police Officer Giovanniello

Because Plaintiff alleges that Officer Giovanniello responded to a 911 call, and “forged charges on” him (ECF 2 ¶ V), the Court construes these complaint as asserting a claim for false arrest. For the elements of a § 1983 false-arrest claim, the Court first looks to state law. *See Manuel v. City of Joliet, Ill.*, 137 S. Ct. 911, 925 (2017) (“[T]o flesh out the elements of this constitutional tort, we must look for ‘tort analogies.’”); *see also Lanning v. City of Glens Falls*, 908 F.3d 19, 25 (2d Cir. 2018) (holding that common law principles are meant simply to guide rather than to control the definition of § 1983 claims and courts should not “mechanically apply” the law of New York State).

To establish a false-arrest claim under New York law, a plaintiff must show that: “(1) the defendant intended to confine [the plaintiff], (2) the plaintiff was conscious of the confinement, (3) the plaintiff did not consent to the confinement and (4) the confinement was not otherwise privileged.” *Liranzo v. United States*, 690 F.3d 78, 95 (2d Cir. 2012). An arrest is privileged if it is based on probable cause. *Jenkins v. City of New York*, 478 F.3d 76, 84 (2d Cir. 2007) (“The existence of probable cause to arrest constitutes justification and is a complete defense to an action for false arrest.”) (quoting *Weyant v. Okst*, 101 F.3d 845, 852 (2d Cir. 1996)) (internal quotation marks omitted). Officers have probable cause to arrest when they “have knowledge or reasonably trustworthy information of facts and circumstances that are sufficient to warrant a person of reasonable caution in the belief that the person to be arrested has committed or is committing a crime.” *Gonzalez v. City of Schenectady*, 728 F.3d 149, 155 (2d Cir. 2013) (emphasis and citation omitted). “Probable cause can exist even where it is based on mistaken information, so long as the arresting officer acted reasonably and in good faith in relying on that information.” *Bernard v. United States*, 25 F.3d 98, 102 (1994); *Curley v. Vill. of Suffern*, 268

F.3d 65, 70 (2d Cir. 2001) (holding that a police officer is “not required to explore and eliminate every theoretically plausible claim of innocence before making an arrest.”).

The facts in the complaint do not suggest that Officer Giovanniello falsely arrested Plaintiff. Plaintiff alleges that Officer Giovanniello responded to a 911 call and “forged charges” on him, but Plaintiff fails to allege that “the facts known by the arresting officer[s] at the time of the arrest” did not “objectively provide[] probable cause to arrest.” *Devenpeck v. Alford*, 543 U.S. 146, 152 (2004); *Ricciuti v. N.Y.C. Transit Auth.*, 124 F.3d 123, 128 (2d Cir. 1997) (“Once a police officer has a reasonable basis for believing there is probable cause, he is not required to explore and eliminate every theoretically plausible claim of innocence before making an arrest.”).

In light of Plaintiff’s *pro se* status, the Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint to state facts giving rise to a false arrest claim against Officer Giovanniello.³

B. Order of Service

Because Plaintiff has been granted permission to proceed IFP, he is entitled to rely on the Court and the U.S. Marshals Service to effect service. *Walker v. Schult*, 717 F.3d. 119, 123 n.6 (2d Cir. 2013); *see also* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(d) (“The officers of the court shall issue and serve all

³ Plaintiff asserts a malicious prosecution claim as well. The tort of malicious prosecution “remedies detention accompanied, not by absence of legal process, but by wrongful institution of legal process.” *Wallace v. Kato*, 549 U.S. 384, 389-90 (2007). To state a claim for malicious prosecution, a plaintiff must allege facts showing: (1) that the defendant initiated or continued a prosecution against the plaintiff; (2) that the defendant lacked probable cause to commence the proceeding or believe the proceeding could succeed; (3) that the defendant acted with malice; and (4) that the prosecution was terminated in the plaintiff’s favor. *See Fulton v. Robinson*, 289 F.3d 188, 195 (2d Cir. 2002). Because favorable termination is an element of a malicious prosecution claim, a plaintiff cannot state such a claim if his criminal proceeding is pending. *See Wallace*, 549 U.S. at 394. Here, Plaintiff’s criminal proceedings are apparently ongoing, and thus he cannot at this time state a malicious prosecution claim. Accordingly, this claim is dismissed without prejudice to renewal should Plaintiff’s arrest not lead to conviction, or if he is convicted, the conviction is overturned.

process . . . in [IFP] cases.”); Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(c)(3) (the court must order the Marshals Service to serve if the plaintiff is authorized to proceed IFP)). Although Rule 4(m) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure generally requires that the summons and complaint be served within 90 days of the date the complaint is filed, Plaintiff is proceeding IFP and could not have served the summons and complaint until the Court reviewed the complaint and ordered that a summons be issued. The Court therefore extends the time to serve until 90 days after the date the summons is issued. If the complaint is not served within that time, Plaintiff should request an extension of time for service. *See Meilleur v. Strong*, 682 F.3d 56, 63 (2d Cir. 2012) (holding that it is the plaintiff’s responsibility to request an extension of time for service); *see also Murray v. Pataki*, 378 F. App’x 50, 52 (2d Cir. 2010) (“As long as the [plaintiff proceeding IFP] provides the information necessary to identify the defendant, the Marshals’ failure to effect service automatically constitutes ‘good cause’ for an extension of time within the meaning of Rule 4(m).”).

To allow Plaintiff to effect service on Defendant Governor Andrew Cuomo through the U.S. Marshals Service, the Clerk of Court is instructed to fill out a U.S. Marshals Service Process Receipt and Return form (USM-285 form) for the defendant. The Clerk of Court is further instructed to issue a summons and deliver to the Marshals Service all the paperwork necessary for the Marshals Service to effect service upon the defendant.

Plaintiff must notify the Court in writing if his address changes, and the Court may dismiss the action if Plaintiff fails to do so.

C. Motion for Counsel

Plaintiff requests that the Court assign him *pro bono* counsel. (ECF 10.) The factors to be considered in ruling on an indigent litigant’s request for counsel include the merits of the case, Plaintiff’s efforts to obtain a lawyer, and Plaintiff’s ability to gather the facts and present the case

if unassisted by counsel. *See Cooper v. A. Sargenti Co.*, 877 F.2d 170, 172 (2d Cir. 1989); *Hodge v. Police Officers*, 802 F.2d 58, 60-62 (2d Cir. 1986). Of these, the merits are “[t]he factor which command[s] the most attention.” *Cooper*, 877 F.2d at 172.

Because it is too early in the proceedings for the Court to assess the merits of the action, Plaintiff’s motion for counsel (ECF 2) is denied without prejudice to renewal at a later date

CONCLUSION

Plaintiff’s claims against Defendants Filipowski and Sevier are dismissed. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) — (iii). The motion for counsel is denied without prejudice.

Plaintiff’s claims against Police Officer Giovanniello are dismissed with leave to replead. Plaintiff must submit an amended complaint to this Court’s Pro Se Intake Unit within sixty days of the date of this order, caption the document as an “Amended Complaint,” and label the document with docket number 21-CV-4096. An “Amended Complaint” form is attached to this order.

The Clerk of Court is directed to mail a copy of this order to Plaintiff, together with an information package.

The Clerk of Court is further instructed to complete the USM-285 form with the address for Defendant Governor Andrew Cuomo and deliver to the U.S. Marshals Service all documents necessary to effect service.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore *in forma pauperis* status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *Cf. Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962) (holding that an appellant demonstrates good faith when he seeks review of a nonfrivolous issue).

SO ORDERED.

Dated: July 13, 2021
White Plains, New York

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nelson S. Román', is written over a horizontal line.

NELSON S. ROMÁN
United States District Judge

DEFENDANT AND SERVICE ADDRESS

1. Andrew Cuomo
Governor of the State of New York
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, New York 12224